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one day
in August

'One day in August' by Bharati Jagannathan
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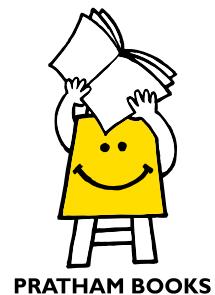
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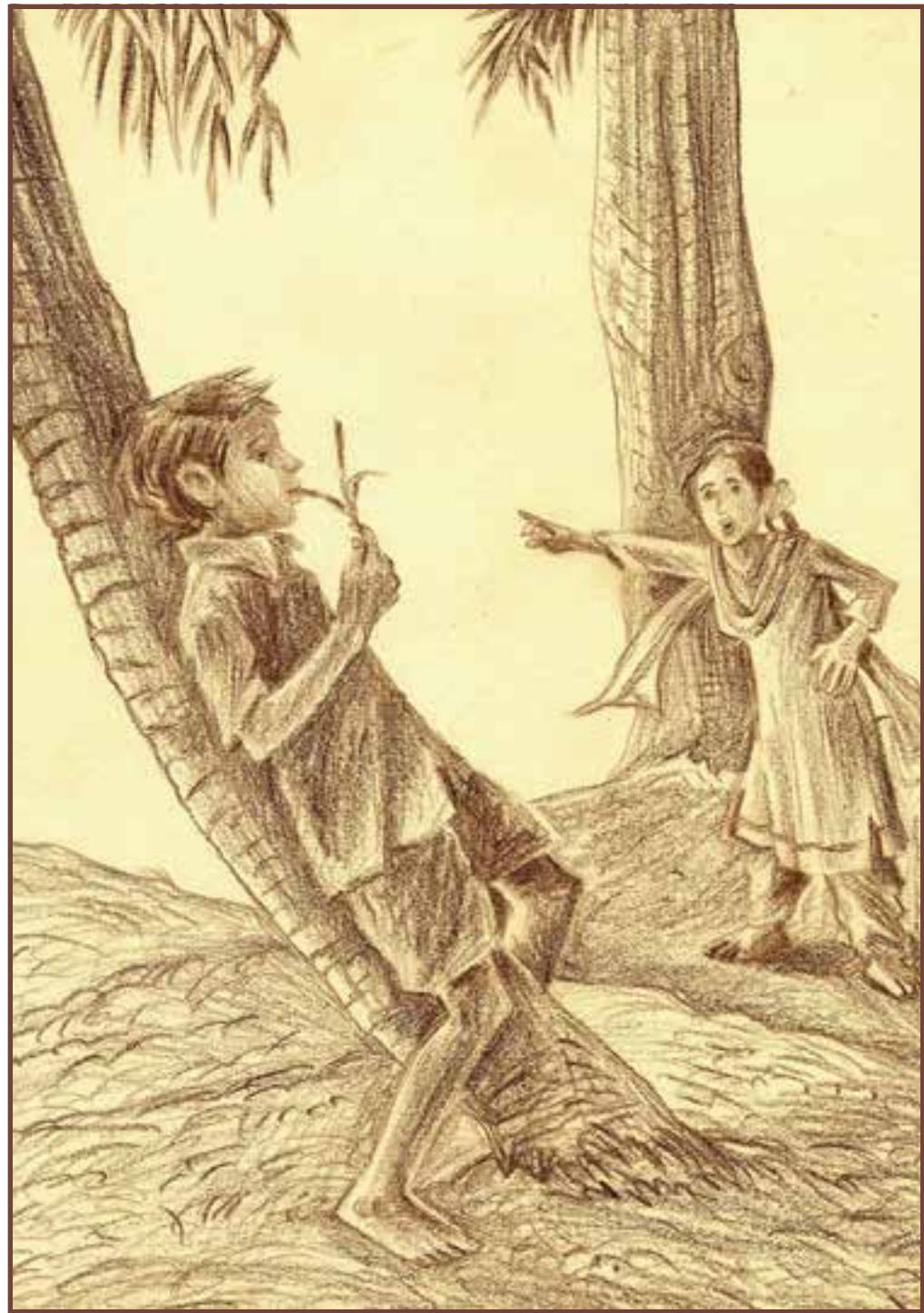
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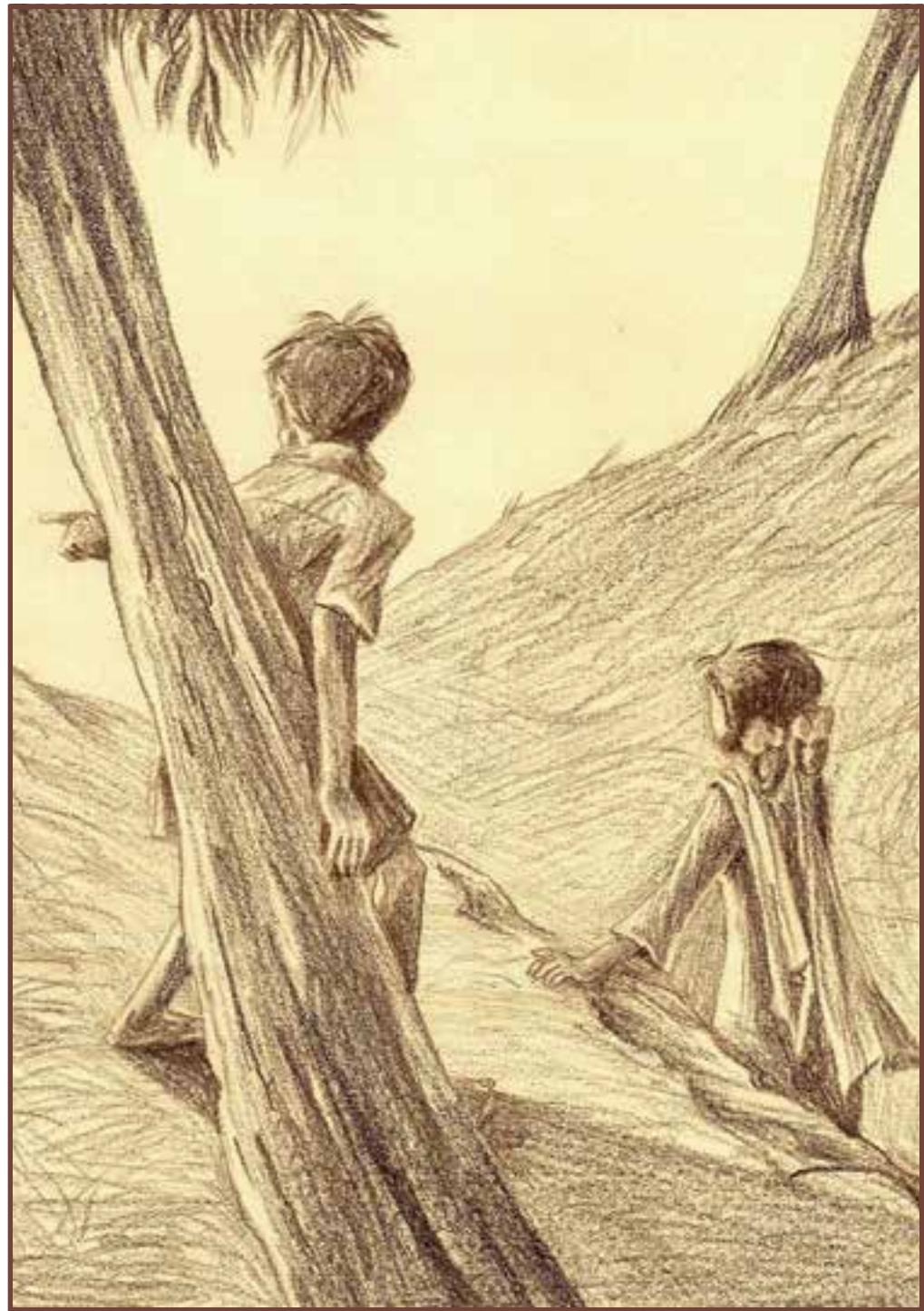
It was a hot morning in August. Not a leaf stirred anywhere, nor was there a cloud to be seen in the sky. Kishen was carefully balancing an upright stick on one palm and chewing a blade of grass held in the other when his friend, Shagufta, came running. “Hey Kishen! There is hardly any grass for even the cows and goats these days, and here you are, eating up their food!”

Kishen laughed, showing the big gap between his teeth.

“And if you keep chewing grass, you will not get a new tooth there,” scolded Shagufta.

“It is already starting to grow,” said Kishen proudly running his tongue over the little hard point, “See, here.” Shagufta peered into his mouth. “Yes, so it is. But where is Moti? I thought you were with her.”





“So I was,” said Kishen. He had come out as usual to graze his cow, and had as usual become engrossed in his games, and forgotten to keep an eye on her. Fortunately Moti never went very far and he had never yet lost her. “Let’s go look for her,” said Shagufta. She was a very responsible eight year old.

“I know the places she likes best,” said Kishen. “There is a thicket near the pond with the water hyacinths. I have warned her that there must be crocodiles hidden under the flowers but she keeps going off to the same place.” He began running.

“There are no crocodiles here, silly,” said Shagufta. “But I have seen water snakes in the pond. That is why no one goes there to bathe.” Shagufta was a year older than Kishen and knew a great many more things than he did.

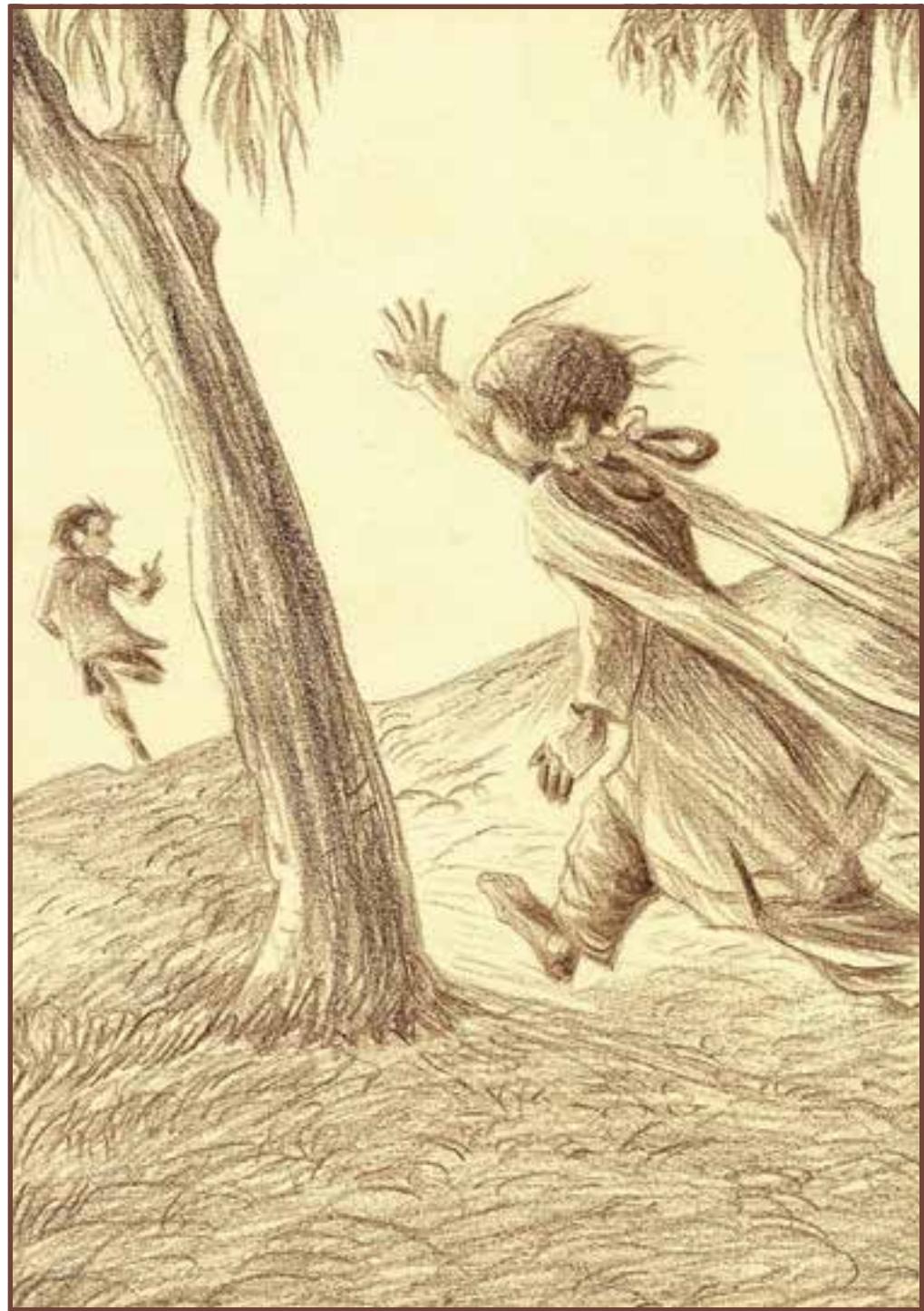
They reached the dark lake but Moti was nowhere to be seen.

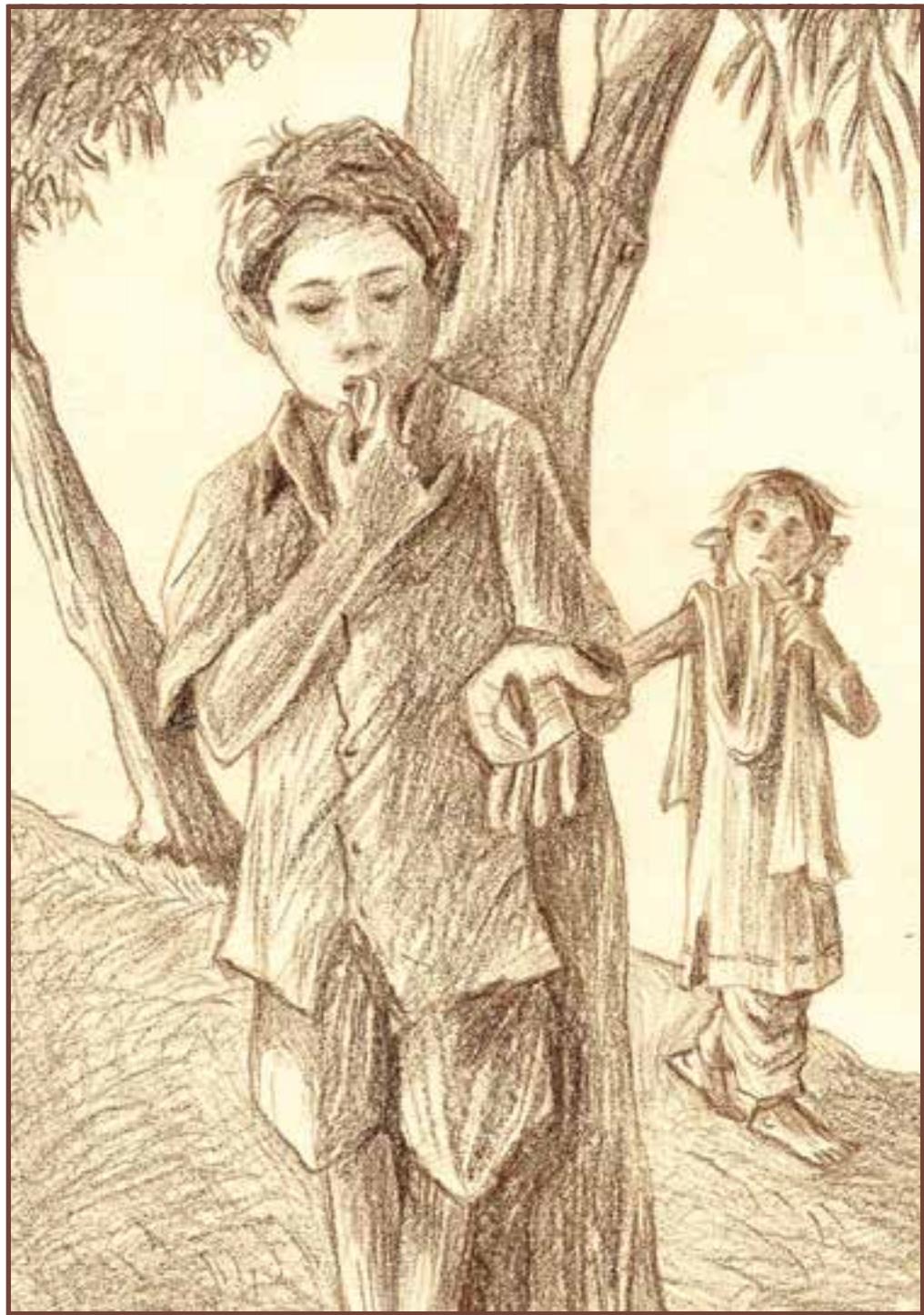
“She wandered off to a clump of mango trees on the other side of the hillock one day. She might have gone there again, but there was scarcely any grass there,” said Kishen scratching his head. The two children ran up the hillock and raced down on the other side.

Shagufta came down faster, but her kurta got caught in a shrub just before they reached the end. “I won, I won,” cried Kishen jumping up and down as Shagufta carefully disentangled her kurta.

“Okay, you won. Where are your mango trees? Oh, there!”

But there was no sign of Moti anywhere. Where could she have gone?





“She has never strayed so far before,” said Kishen puzzled. Shagufta started chewing her dupatta, as she always did when she got worried.

“Don’t eat your clothes,” said Kishen. “Look here, I have got some achar. It is still a bit raw and sour. It hadn’t matured yet. Don’t tell anyone. Maaji had put the new achar out in the sun and I stole two pieces.”

He unfurled a small packet tied up in leaves and held it out. Shagufta loved the tangy, spicy flavour of unripe pickle. She chewed her piece meditatively and said, “You know, Kishen, Abba jaan told me this morning that we have become ‘sutantar’ or independent.”

“What does that mean? Sutantar?”

“That means that we will rule ourselves now,” said Shagufta, trying to understand herself what it meant.

“You mean we have all become rajas now?” asked Kishen. Maaji had told him stories where kings ruled. If everyone was now to rule, he thought, everyone must be a king. And he must also be a king.

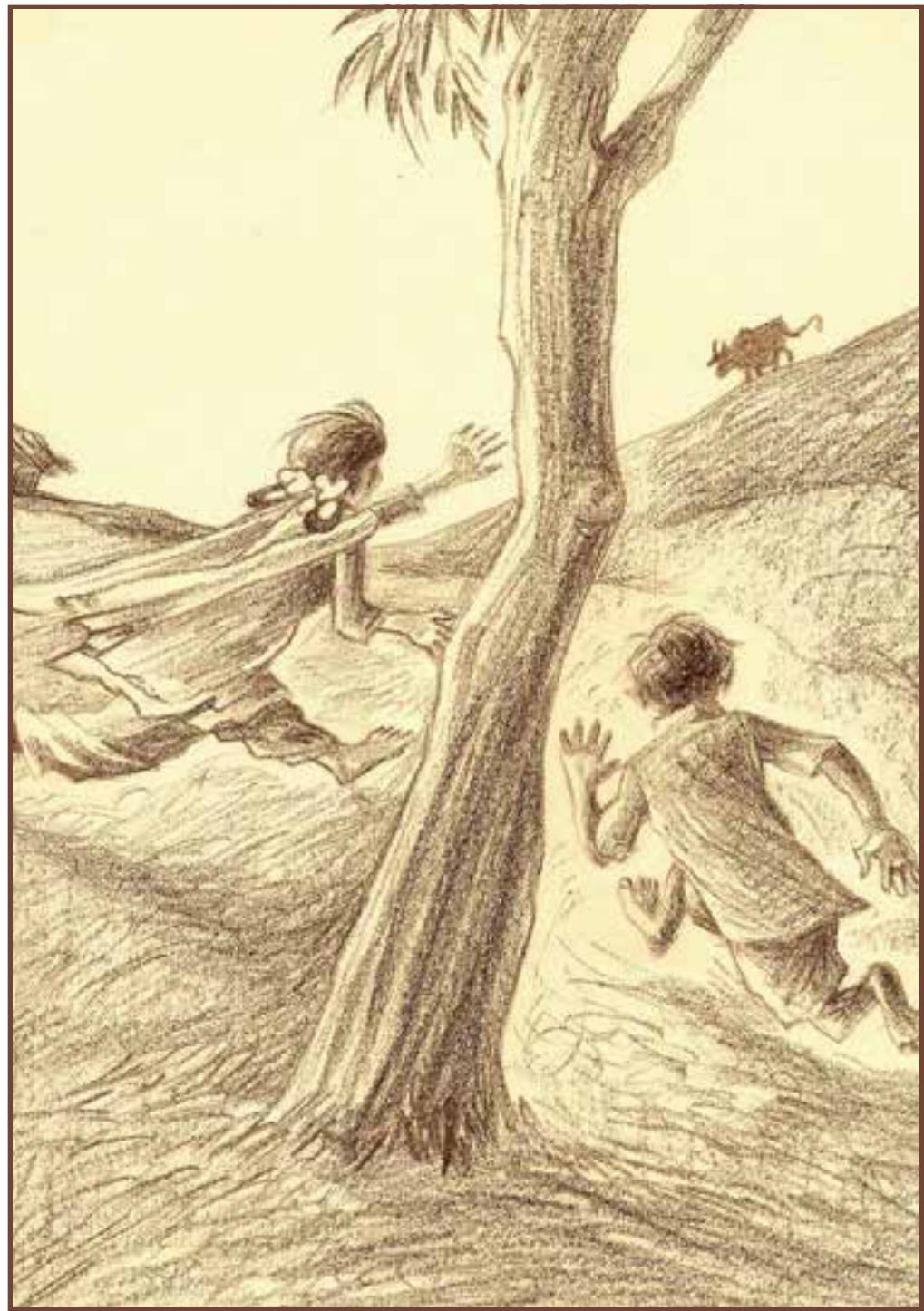
“I will be a Maharaja,” he said grandly, puffing himself out.

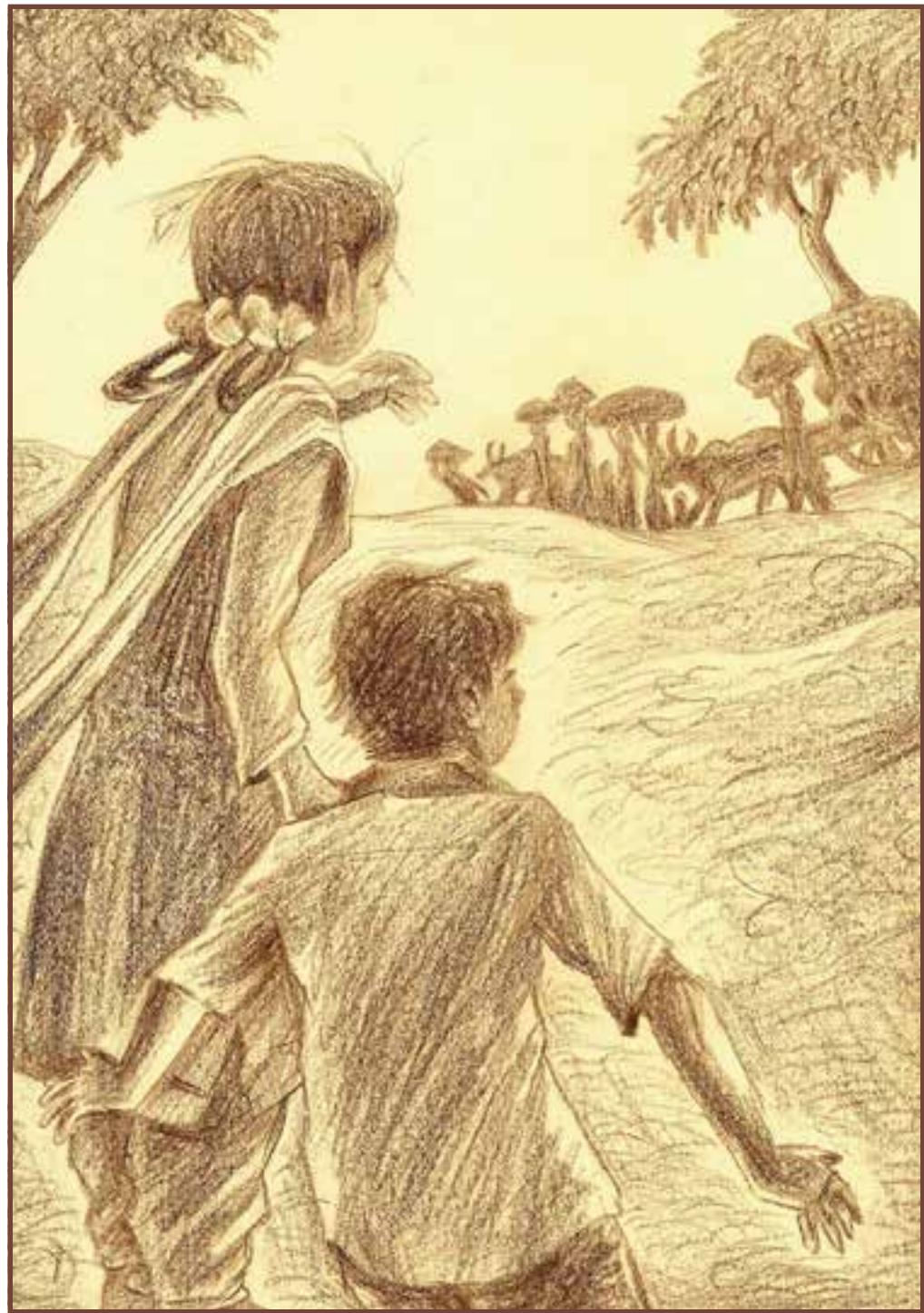
“Abba jaan said the English will now leave our country.”

“Who are the English?”

“I don’t know.” Neither of the children had ever seen an Englishman. “But I do know that that is Moti,” cried Shagufta suddenly as she spotted a cow in the distance.

Both of them ran wildly, shouting, “Moti, Moti!” all the while. But when they reached the cow, they found it wasn’t Moti at all. It looked at them for a moment and then shut its bored eyes again.





Shagufta and Kishen looked around, puzzled. They had never come so far from their village before. Everything was like their village. There were dry fields, some neem and kikar trees, a knot of tall date palms, a broken scarecrow teetering precariously on a bent pole and a thatched hut or two in the middle of distant fields. And yet, everything was different. There were no familiar landmarks. Even as they looked, they spotted several people in the distance carrying bundles.

They also saw a few bullock carts and some cows and buffaloes. Kishen was very curious.

“Let us go and ask them where they are off to,” said Kishen, always looking for adventure.

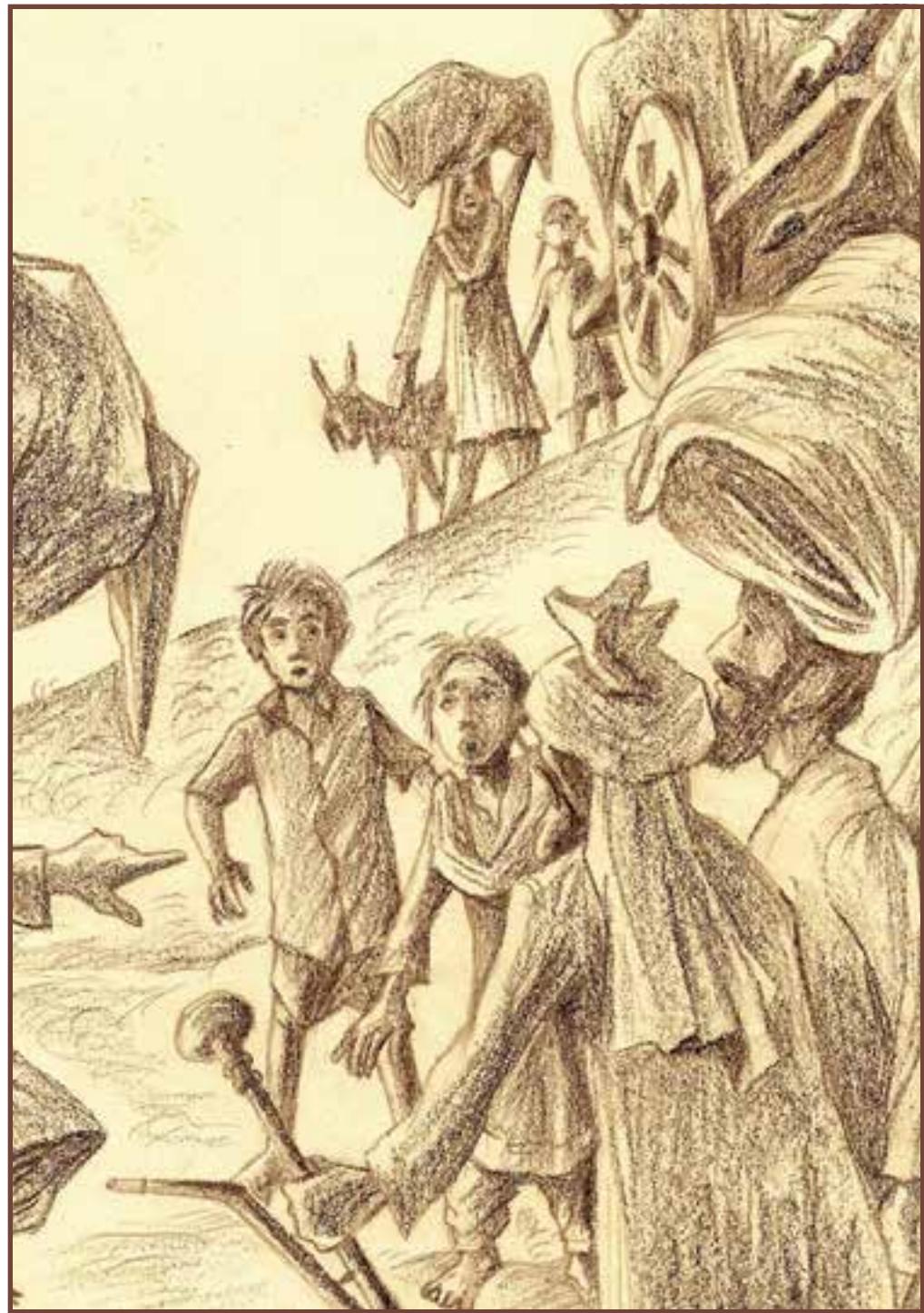
“No, let us look for Moti and go home with her,” said Shagufta.

“Maybe Moti has gone there. You can’t see her anywhere here, can you?”

Since Kishen was adamant, Shagufta had no choice but to go along. When they neared the crowd of people, they saw that they looked worried and frightened. Most were balancing awkward bundles on their heads. Some people were sobbing and crying as they walked.

Shagufta began to chew her dupatta again. Somebody asked them who they were and what they were doing alone.

Shagufta said, “We have lost our cow. Have you seen it anywhere?”



There were a few grunts from the people who heard them. One young man said, “We have lost everything we had, little girl, because your people have pushed us out. And you are complaining because you have lost a cow?”

“Who pushed whom? I didn’t see anyone pushing,” said Shagufta.

“Oh yes, they have, because we are Muslims. There is no place for us in this country now,” said another man bitterly.

“But I am also a Muslim, and Abba Jaan said this morning that our country is now independent.”

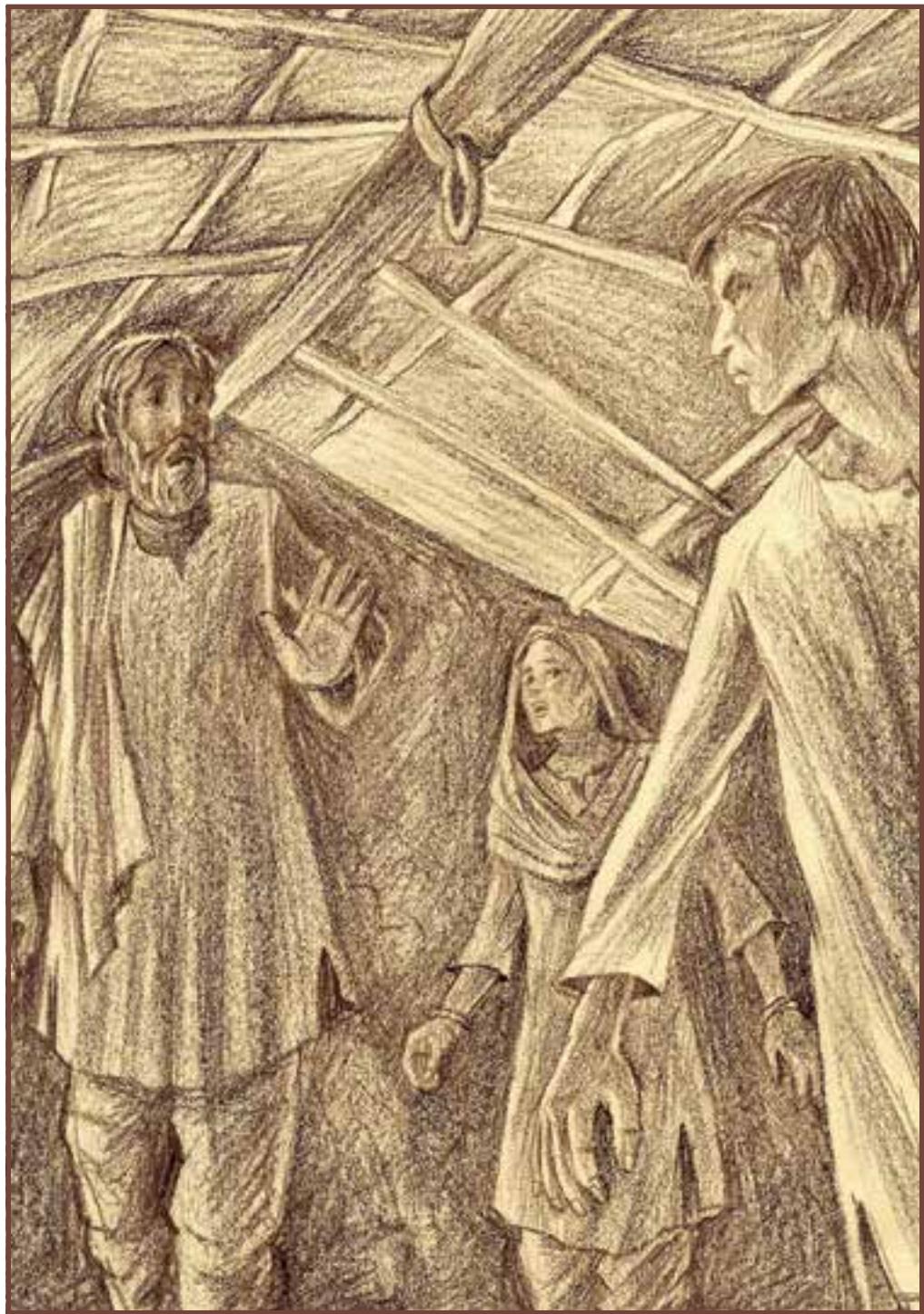
Nobody seemed to be bothered about independence.

“Muslim? You are a Muslim? Then what are you doing here, children? Where are your parents?” said many voices.

“They are at home,” said Kishen. “We are from Maler Kotla. There...” he pointed with his finger across the hillock towards his village.

“Well, well, God knows where you will be after a few days,” said one old man as he plodded by.

Someone in the crowd wailed loudly and suddenly there was chaos. Shagufta grasped Kishen’s hand and they ran.



When Shagufta reached home, she heard Bhai jaan telling Abba and Ammi that they must leave. “There is no place in this country for us anymore,” he was saying, exactly as that young man in the crowd had. But Abba said, “Son, this will always be our home.”

Bhai jaan came out into the courtyard angrily. Kishen and Shagufta were crouching dismally in a corner.

“Bhai jaan, Moti has run away,” said Shagufta and tears came into her eyes. Her elder brother could never bear to see Shagufta cry. He lifted her up onto his shoulders and told her not to worry. “And why should it matter to you if this Hindu boy’s cow runs away?” he added gruffly.

Kishen's grandmother picking up dried dung cakes in her yard heard Bhai jaan. "Listen Javed, my son!" she said. "Long long ago, when Guru Gobind Singh ji was fleeing from his pursuers, the Nawab of Maler Kotla gave him shelter. And Guru Gobind Singh ji blessed our village saying that whatever happened in the land, the people of Maler Kotla would always give shelter to one another. I know that people are killing and robbing everywhere. Times are bad, very bad. But believe me, son, in our village, we will all remain brothers and sisters."

Bhai jaan's anger melted away. He put Shagufta down, patted her and told her to go and play with Kishen.



But Shagufta and Kishen were miserable thinking of people killing and robbing each other. Nor could they stop thinking of Moti. “Do you think someone could have stolen her?” asked Kishen. Tears streamed down his cheeks. “Do you think they will kill her?”

“Don’t say such things,” said Shagufta. But she was also crying.

It started growing dark. Kishen’s mother was also upset about Moti but she urged him to eat. He had had nothing since the piece of pickle in the morning, but still could not bear to eat anything. Nor could Shagufta.

She kept thinking of all the things they had seen and heard that day and felt very sad.

Just then, there was a low sound of a cow's moo. Moti! Shagufta rushed out of her house. Kishen had come out too. Yes, there was Moti walking back, dusty and tired. The children fell on her neck and hugged her. Moti had come back. Yes, Moti had come back! Kishen's and Shagufta's mothers also came out. "Thank god, sister! A cow is very valuable," said Shagufta's mother to Kishen's, and turned to Shagufta, "Now will you come and eat?"

"Yes, I am extremely hungry," said Shagufta happily, waving to Kishen who was also going in for his dinner. For the moment, they forgot that they had been sad about so many things.

Facts from History

India won independence from the British in 1947 after many decades of struggle. Independence was however accompanied by the partition of the subcontinent into two new countries, India and Pakistan. Partition was one of the greatest dislocations of human beings in history, and caused great suffering to millions. Hindus and Sikhs in the western Punjab moved eastwards to the newly independent state of India as Muslims in east Punjab moved westwards into the new state of Pakistan. Immense loss of life and property and communal violence attended the birth of the new nations.



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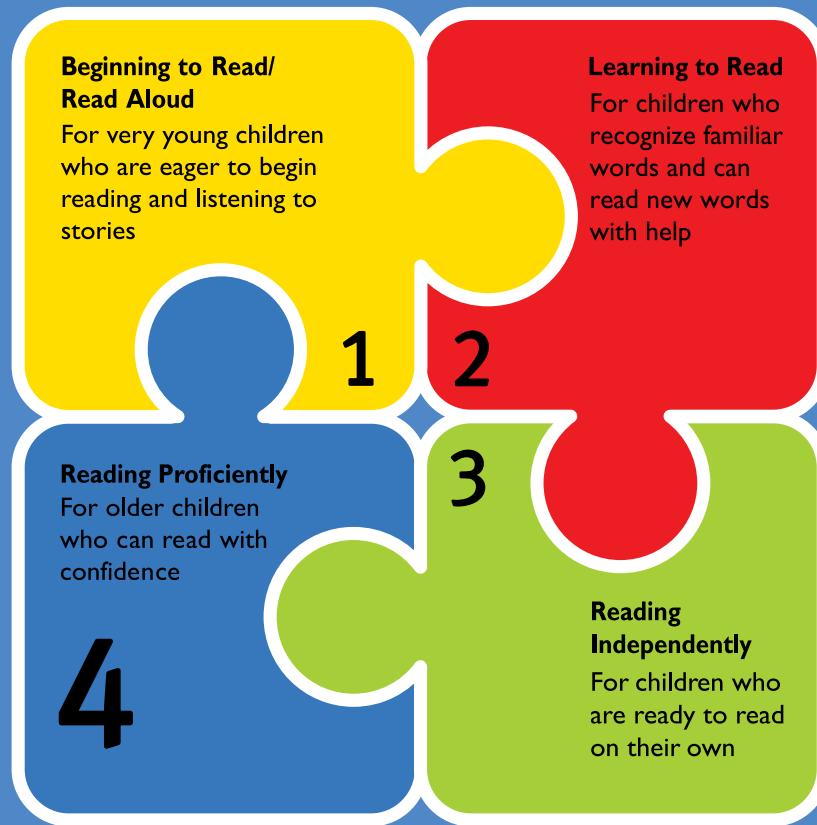
Bharati Jagannathan teaches history to undergraduates in a Delhi University college. She is deeply interested in trees and birds. Her stories, *The Timid Train* and *Samira's Awful Lunch* have been quite popular among children.

Bharati dedicates this book to Nandini, Nitya and Shruti.

Prashant Soni is a well known illustrator who has illustrated for a number of text books and story books. Drawing and painting since his childhood, Prashant has worked with many NGO projects in Rajasthan and neighbouring states. He has illustrated the book, *The Talaabs of Darbhanga* for Pratham Books.

Kishen's cow strays away one day in August, leading him and his friend Shagufta into unknown territory. This gentle story of love, friendship, and the innocent wisdom of childhood is set against a time when the partition of India caused immense loss to millions of people.

Learning to read – level by level. This is a Level 4 book.



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